

KOREA AND "THE BLUE AIRPLANES"

By M. Hill Goodspeed

Aerial view of K-1 at Pusan, one of the numerous airfields scattered throughout Korea and home to Naval Aviation's land-based aircraft, such as these Marine Corps F4U Corsairs. (All photos from National Naval Aviation Museum)

The painted symbols tell the story of the differences between World War II and Korea. On a scoreboard that once adorned the hangar deck aboard USS *Essex* (CV 9), row upon row of Japanese rising sun flags are testament to the prowess of the carrier's embarked air groups in the Pacific: the silhouettes of enemy carriers, battleships, and cruisers speaking to the great sea battles of World War II. Arrayed below in stark contrast is the ship's combat record from the Korean War. Great ships of a global war have been replaced by silhouettes of locomotive engines, factories, and even ox carts, symbols of the interdiction missions that were the hallmark of the naval air war in Korea.

When North Korean troops stormed across the 38th parallel into South Korea on 25 June 1950, they launched a war that was not supposed to be. The mushroom clouds billowing up over Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945 signaled to many U.S. military strategists the end of conventional wars. In addition, the government's desire to cut military spending

as the nation transitioned to a peacetime economy resulted in a massive drawdown of the nation's forces. Particularly hard hit was the Navy, as the number of its combat aircraft dropped from 29,125 in 1945 to 9,422 by 1950. Similarly, whereas there had been 28 large-deck aircraft carriers in commission on V-J Day, by June 1950 only 11 plied the world's oceans, most of them concentrated in the Atlantic and Mediterranean. Only one, USS *Valley Forge* (CV 45), operated in the Western Pacific, and it was from her deck that Naval Aviation first responded to the North Korean invasion on 3 July 1950.

The aircraft on *Valley Forge's* flight deck included the F4U Corsair, which entered combat in 1943, and the AD Skyraider, the prototype of which had been ordered in 1944. Also on board, however, were two squadrons flying the F9F Panther, the Navy's newest jet aircraft, as well as a detachment of Helicopter Utility Squadron (HU) 1 flying the HO3S. As the war progressed, the ships reactivated for

combat were products of a previous war while the skies over Korea represented the proving ground for new technologies, including jet and rotary-wing aircraft. And it wasn't just hardware. Less than a month after the North Korean invasion, 14 Naval Air Reserve squadrons, largely manned by World War II veterans, were activated. By November 1951, every third combat mission flown by a Navy or Marine Corps aircraft had a reservist in the cockpit.

The environment in which man and machine waged war was challenging—from the mountainous topography of the Korean peninsula to the extreme weather conditions marked by bitterly cold winters and stifling hot summers. The former proved particularly worrisome for aircrews forced to ditch their planes or bail out, the frigid water temperatures causing hypothermia in just minutes and meaning certain death if rescue were not quickly forthcoming.

Enemy anti-aircraft fire and the inherent dangers of carrier flight operations also took their toll. For example, in just one month of operations aboard USS *Antietam* (CV 36), 26 aircraft suffered some battle damage, eight were damaged beyond repair, and nine were lost with four personnel killed and 17 injured. The action reports of other carriers told similar tales.

The first phase of the Korean War involved the epic invasion of Inchon and shifting battle lines as U.N. and North Korean and Chinese forces engaged in ground combat up and down the Korean peninsula. Close air support proved a primary mission of naval aircraft, particularly during the first year of the war. The U.S. Air Force favored a centralized approach to directing aircraft in support of ground troops, but Navy and Marine Corps pilots espoused direct communication between ground controllers and pilots, which built trust and made missions more effective. As Capt. John S. Thach, commander of USS *Sicily* (CVE 118), noted in a speech he made at the time, "This was demonstrated one afternoon when a ground controller pointed out the exact location of an enemy artillery piece and said, 'Be careful now, we are quite close to it.' The Corsair pilot from *Sicily* made the attack and then turned his attention to a tank he saw under a tree, radioing the controller his intent to attack it. 'Let it alone. I told you we were close. That tank is me.'" So effective were naval aircraft in close air support that when an enemy prisoner was questioned about what U.S. weapon

he feared the most, the translator returned the answer, "the blue airplanes."

The first year of the war also witnessed one of the most unique missions ever flown by naval aircraft with the attack against the Hwachon Dam, which was located some 50 miles northeast of the South Korean capital of Seoul. Built during the Japanese occupation, the dam served to hold back the waters of the Pukchong and Han Rivers. In Communist hands, it offered the tactical advantage of being able to raise or lower the water levels in the region. On 1 May 1951, Cmdr. Dick Merrick led eight AD Skyraiders off the deck of USS *Princeton* (CV 37) and set course for the Hwachon Dam. Slung beneath their fuselages were aerial torpedoes, the first time that type of ordnance had been carried into battle since World War II. Among the pilots was then Lt. j.g. James R. Sanderson, who recalled the attack run. "Down we streamed at tree-top level, throttled back almost to idle. . . This approach seemed like we were in slow motion. Even so, I felt rushed when slowing the rate of descent to attain level flight at 75 feet on the radar altimeter. Approaching 1,000 yards from the dam, I eased the nose of the aircraft down slightly. As the radar altimeter approached 50 feet, I gave the center station jettison handle a firm, steady tug. The aircraft responded with its customary jump, giving thanks



A formation of F2H-2 Banshees passes over USS Kearsarge (CV 33) off Korea. The Banshee was one of the early Navy jets that received its baptism of fire during the war.

for the lighter load." Six of the torpedoes ran true: knocking out two gates and damaging another one, which sent water pouring through and raised the level of the rivers, blocking advancing Communist troops.



Marines load stretchers carrying wounded brothers in arms onto an HO3S helicopter for evacuation from a hilltop in Korea.

The second phase of the Korean War, lasting from July 1951 until the signing of the armistice declaring a truce in July 1953, involved opposing forces engaged in a stalemate punctuated by fierce battles for more advantageous terrain. While close air support remained an important mission, a significant percentage of sorties were, in the words of a carrier air group action report, carried out in “pursuing a systematic program of interdiction against enemy supply routes and destroying air facilities, power complexes, and manufacturing centers in North Korea to prevent further offensive action by the enemy.” A cornerstone of this effort, inaugurated in late 1952 and named “Cherokee Strikes” (in honor of the Native American ancestry of 7th Fleet commander Vice Adm. Joseph Clark), involved well-briefed and large-scale attacks against enemy supply concentrations that decreased the effectiveness of forces confronting U.N. troops on the front lines.

Throughout the war the shifting of forces also demonstrated the importance of helicopters to the modern battlefield. Having established its first helicopter squadron in 1947, the Marine Corps developed a tactical doctrine for employing them in amphibious assaults, with rotary-wing aircraft providing the ability to execute a “vertical envelopment” of the enemy. In Korea, helicopters enhanced command-and-control capabilities by enabling senior officers to shuttle between points on the front lines and added a valuable dimension to casualty evacuation by enabling wounded Marines to get to medical care more quickly. Helicopters also provided valuable service in the reconnaissance role, particularly in helping to coordinate artillery fire. As testament to the value of rotary-wing aviation, during the pivotal Chosin Reservoir campaign in late 1950, Marine Observation Squadron (VMO) 6 helicopters logged 64 reconnaissance flights, 421 transport missions, and 191 medical evacuations, the latter saving the lives of some 200 wounded Marines.


In September 1951, the ability to move troops increased with the arrival of Marine Helicopter Transport Squadron (HMR) 161. The squadron flew the HRS-1, a design whose ruggedness mirrored the landscape over which it would fly. With a top speed of 101 mph generated by a 550-horsepower Pratt and Whitney R-1340 engine, the HRS-1 was designed to accommodate eight troops. It did not take long for the squadron to become operational. Eleven days after arriving in country, HMR-161 commenced Operation Windmill I in support of the 1st Marine Division, airlifting supplies a distance of seven miles from a base camp to a forward operating area. This marked the first major test of the capabilities of transport helicopters, and included 28 flights that delivered 18,848 pounds of supplies and evacuated 74 seriously wounded Marines. On 21 September 1951, 12 helicopters carried 224 combat troops and some 18,000 pounds of equipment a distance of 14 miles to occupy Hill 884.

Helicopters also changed the face of search and rescue—whether hovering near carriers over the frigid waters off Korea or venturing over the beach into enemy territory to rescue downed airmen. Among the notable missions was that flown by Lt. j.g. John C. Koelsch, who on 3 July 1951 volunteered to make a flight into hostile territory to rescue a downed Marine pilot. Arriving at the rescue site, Koelsch maneuvered his HO3S over Capt. James Wilkins while his crewman, Aviation Radioman George Neal, lowered the rescue sling.

Before Wilkins could be pulled aboard, concentrated enemy fire hit the helicopter and Koelsch had to execute a forced landing. The trio evaded the enemy for nine days before being captured. Tragically, Koelsch died in a prisoner of war camp. For his actions in the air and in captivity, he received the Medal of Honor posthumously, the first helicopter pilot honored with the nation’s highest military honor. Such was the value of rotary-wing aviation that from a total of 163 helicopters in the naval inventory in July 1951, 661 Navy and Marine Corps helicopters were operational by the end of the war two years later.

Not all naval aircraft flew from the decks of ships. A network of airfields scattered throughout South Korea was home to land-based assets that included Marine squadrons, one of which (VMF-115) had among its pilots Boston Red Sox slugger Ted Williams and future astronaut John Glenn. Another notable squadron in Korea was VMF(N)-513, appropriately nicknamed the “Flying Nightmares,” which was credited with 10 confirmed night kills, including the first shoot down of a jet using radar. Flying a mixture of land-based P2V Neptunes and P4Y Liberators as well as PBM flying boats, 19 Navy patrol squadrons deployed to Korea during the war, performing coastal surveillance of shipping lanes and dropping flares to illuminate targets for night attacks.

Unlike in World War II, where air-to-air combat actions resulted in hundreds of downed enemy airplanes, there were relatively few opportunities for Naval Aviation personnel to engage in dogfights. One of the most notable occurring on 18 November 1952, when F9F-5 Panthers of VF-781 from USS *Oriskany* (CVA 34) engaged MiG-15s flown by Soviet pilots over the Sea of Japan. In another engagement, Marine Capt. Jesse Folmar of VMA-312 managed to shoot down an enemy MiG while flying a propeller-driven F4U-4B Corsair. Most naval aviators chalked up kills flying in “MiG Alley” as exchange pilots with the U.S. Air Force, including Maj. John F. Bolt, who shot down five MiG-15s while flying an F-86 Sabre to become Naval Aviation’s only ace of the Korean War.

The Korean War represented one of the first heated battlegrounds of the 50-year Cold War. Some of the carriers that steamed in the Sea of Japan were called to action in another war in Vietnam just over a decade later as an instrument of power projection ashore. The first-generation jet aircraft that flew in hostile Korean skies spawned successors of astounding capabilities, and the successors to helicopters of the early 1950s were the versatile platforms of today. In James Michener’s novel *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, the fictional character Rear Adm. George Tarrant captures the very real service of Naval Aviation personnel in Korea when he asks, “Where did we get such men?” 

Hill Goodspeed is historian and artifact collections manager at the National Naval Aviation Museum in Pensacola, Fla.



Looking weary from the stress of combat operations, pilots aboard USS Philippine Sea (CV 47) examine a map of Korea as they prepare for the next mission, 1950-1951.